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STUDIES IN THE PSALTER

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In the preceding articles the nature and form of the Psalter have been examined with special reference to its origin and date. It now remains to come to close quarters with this problem. But how is it to be attacked?

It has often been the fashion of late to begin with the internal evidence, or at least to lay the main emphasis upon it. This avenue of approach affords enchanting perspectives to the impressionist school of criticism, but it speedily leads into the wilderness of pure subjectivism. The peculiarities which inhere in the Psalter as a hymnbook, described in the previous articles, are so many warnings across the path of the internal evidence. Their unmistakable legend is: "No Thoroughfare." I am more and more convinced that the only proper way in which to begin an investigation into the question of the date of the Psalter is along the line of the external evidence. The way is, to be sure, a rather dusty, uninteresting public highway, but it serves to accustom us to the points of the compass. It gives a sense of direction. Only when we have reached the end of it are we at liberty to enjoy the explorer's privilege of striking off into the more exciting paths of the internal evidence. These paths are as delightfully soft, as mossily yielding to the foot of subjective criticism as Bypath Meadow was to Christian, and it is only when we have secured our sense of direction that we can safely enter upon them. I therefore feel bound to ask the readers of these articles to accompany me along the highway, though I have no very interesting scenery to promise you and though you are likely to become somewhat foot-sore.

The external evidence is of two kinds. (1) There is the usual kind drawn from other literature in which references are made to the Psalter as a collection, or in which citations or reminiscences of individual psalms may be found. In this connection the canon long ago laid down by Robertson Smith, but sadly neglected at

times, should always be observed: "The only sound principle for the historical study of the Psalter [is] that the discussion of the age of individual psalms must be preceded by an inquiry into the date of the several collections." Since, as we have previously seen, our present Psalter consists of a number of minor psalters of different dates, the bearing of the evidence for individual psalms upon the various collections of which they are members must always be kept in mind.¹ (2) There is also the special evidence furnished by the history of the temple music. This evidence is indirect. It does not furnish any proofs of the existence of the Psalter or of individual psalms, but only *premises* for their existence. Yet its value is not to be overlooked, especially in connection with a study of the psalm-titles.

With reference to the titles, if it be provisionally assumed that they are not by the authors of the psalms but belong to the redaction, they might be regarded as a third kind of external evidence as compared with that which is drawn from the psalms themselves. But as an integral part of the redaction of the Psalter they must be subsumed under the head of internal evidence so long as our inquiry is confined to the history of the Psalter as a collection. On the basis of the above considerations we may map out the course of our journey as follows: We are first to investigate the two main groups of the external evidence, and then examine the testimony of the titles in the light of this evidence and upon the basis of all the foregoing attempt to fix the dates of the minor psalters. Only when these various guide-posts have been passed and the directions which they suggest duly noted are we prepared to cut our way into the thicket of the internal evidence of the psalms themselves.

THE EVIDENCE OF THE LITERATURE EXTERNAL TO THE PSALTER

I. The New Testament furnishes the most convenient starting-point for our journey. There can be no reasonable doubt that the writers of the New Testament not only knew the Psalter as we now

¹ Of course, it is conceivable that this or that psalm has been added later to a given collection (compare what was said on the anonymous psalms in the Davidic collections in Books I and II), but the above canon certainly furnishes the only correct general method of procedure.

have it, but also regarded it in the strictest sense as Scripture. The Book of Psalms is specifically referred to.² Some sixty-one of the one hundred and fifty psalms are directly quoted, besides the numerous reminiscences and allusions. These sixty-one psalms are taken indifferently from the five books of the Psalter. These facts could not demonstrate that all the remaining psalms were also present in the Psalter but, apart from the probabilities of the case, the next consideration implies beyond doubt that they were.

The Psalter had by this time attained full canonical dignity and was regarded as inspired in the most literal sense. The words of the Psalmists are practically the words of God or of Christ or of the Holy Spirit.³ They are cited with the formulae regularly employed in citing the Scriptures.⁴ The psalms were argued from and interpreted, as all inspired documents in those days were argued from and interpreted. That is, their words were treated as detached oracles and allegorized on the assumption that a word of God must have a hidden meaning.⁵ If any further evidence were needed, it would be found at Luke 24:44, where the Psalter is grouped with the Law and the Prophets as a part of the inspired Scriptures upon the basis of which the messiahship of Jesus could be proved.⁶

But if the canonicity of the Psalter was as assured as these facts indicate, it is impossible to think of any psalms being subsequently added to it. Josephus tells us plainly what is involved in the idea of canonicity at this time. "No one hath been so bold as either to add anything to them [the Scriptures] or take anything from them, or to make any change in them" (*Con. Apion*, I. 8). But the view of the Psalter which the New Testament writers

² Luke 20:42; Acts 1:20.

³ Mark 12:36; Heb. 1:5, 13; 5:6.

⁴ E.g., *γέγραπται* (Rom. 15:3); *ἡ γραφή* (John 19:28, 29).

⁵ Compare the first two chapters of Hebrews for a classical illustration.

⁶ The psalms were often cited as words of David (e.g., Rom. 11:9; Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16). At Heb. 4:7 "David" would seem to be used as the name of the entire collection, on the supposition that all the psalms were by David. The psalm here quoted as David's (Ps. 95) has no title in the Hebrew, and we know that the tendency to ascribe all the Psalter to David was very strong in later times. Yet it must be remembered that this psalm has a Davidic title in the LXX and the author of Hebrews depended upon the LXX.

assume as a matter of course must have already been held a considerable time before they wrote.

II. The Psalms of Solomon indirectly support this inference. This interesting collection dates from about the middle of the first century B.C. It would seem to have been consciously modeled on the great Davidic Psalter. Its psalms were probably written originally in Hebrew and used in the liturgical services, at least of the synagogue.⁷ From the great influence which the Davidic psalter exerted upon the author of the Solomonic Psalter we might infer the canonicity of the former collection, but fortunately there is other evidence before this time which makes it unnecessary to rest our case on an inference.

III. In a letter incorporated into the Second Book of the Maccabees we read as follows: "Not only were the same things related in the writings, namely the memorabilia of Nehemiah [or "about Nehemiah"] but also, how he, founding a library, gathered together the books concerning the kings and prophets and the [books] of David [*τὰ τοῦ Δαυείδ*] and letters of kings concerning temple gifts" (II Macc. 2:13). The letter in which this statement is found is universally admitted to be spurious. It can hardly be dated with safety earlier than the first years of the first Christian century. This has led many scholars to disparage the tradition unduly. The date of the documentary evidence of a tradition is not necessarily to be identified with the date of the tradition. Though contained in a late document, the present tradition is in several respects highly original. It has probably drifted down out of a considerably earlier period and been caught in the literary eddy in which we now find it. The allusion to "the [books] of David" can only be understood of a collection of Davidic psalms. Nothing is said as to the extent of the collection. Whether "David" is to be strictly taken or includes other psalms, as in the New Testament, it is impossible to say. The relationship of the collection to the Canon is equally vague. The context suggests that the real writer of the letter understood the allusion to be to the sacred books, but the peculiar phrasing of the tradition itself suggests

⁷ *Selah* occurs twice in these psalms (Pss. 17 and 18), and the note "for the chief musician" probably occurs once (Ps. 8).

an opposite view. The reference to "founding a library," to "letters of kings concerning temple gifts," which cannot be certainly identified with any biblical books, and the striking omission of any reference to the Law, all suggest that the activities of Nehemiah were due to literary and historical, rather than to dogmatic, interests.⁸ We may therefore conclude that in a dateless but probably quite early tradition, preserved in a much later document, Nehemiah is connected with a collection of Davidic psalms of unknown extent, the relationship of which to the Canon is not expressed but would seem to be rather loose.

IV. Our next evidence is found in the First Book of the Maccabees. The original work was undoubtedly written in Hebrew or Palestinian Aramaic and may safely be placed about 100 B.C. Our present Greek translation, however, can hardly be dated earlier than the last decades B.C. There are three undoubted references to the Psalter in I Macc. Two of these require no comment.⁹ The third is important. Ps. 79:2, 3 is formally cited at I Macc. 7:17 and applied to a massacre of the party of the Chasidim or "saints" which occurred in 162 B.C. Some scholars have attempted to argue from the peculiar formula of citation used here that the psalm was cited as an inspired oracle. Literally the formula reads, "According to the words which [he] wrote." The subject of the verb in the original is not expressed. The difficulty was early felt. A correction of the Sinaitic MS supplies "the prophet." Other MSS supply David or Asaph. It has been pointed out that subjectless verbs often occur in citation formulas in the New Testament and patristic literature where God or Spirit or Scripture is to be understood and the citation thereby described as an inspired oracle, and it is claimed that the present citation

⁸ The omission of any reference to the Law is best explained as due to the fact that its existence was assumed as a matter of course. The way in which the other books are referred to, and especially the emphasis upon Nehemiah rather than upon Ezra against the strong set of later tradition—all are marks of the primitive character of this tradition.

⁹ I Macc. 2:63; cf. Ps. 146:4; I Macc. 9:23; cf. Ps. 92:8. The latter passage shows the influence of the LXX but this must be attributed to the Greek translator, as it is unlikely that the author of the original Hebrew work would have used the LXX in his scriptural quotations.

should be interpreted in the same way. But a careful examination of the citation formulas in the New Testament, apostolic Fathers, and Justin Martyr fails to disclose any real analogy to the formula used here and it is more than doubtful if an inference may be drawn from it as to a theory of the inspiration of the psalm.¹⁰ This conclusion is of some importance. Ps. 79 is one of the psalms which, on internal grounds, has been most confidently affirmed to be Maccabean. On the other hand it has been objected on the basis of the citation formula that the psalm is already quoted as inspired by 100 B.C., and therefore it must have been composed much earlier than the Maccabean period. But if the formula of citation does not imply inspiration, this argument falls to the ground. But even if the intention was to cite the psalm as Scripture, the argument for an earlier date than the early period of the Maccabees would not be sound. A period of sixty or seventy years would afford time enough for a document to acquire a sacred character. The history of the New Testament Canon will teach us that much. Moreover, if it could be shown that there were older collections of psalms already in existence and regarded as inspired in the Maccabean period, later psalms, especially those used in the temple, would very easily become attached to them and the odor of sanctity of the older psalms would speedily communicate itself to the later psalms.

One further point must be noted in connection with the three quotations in I Macc. The first two are from psalms in Books IV-V, the last is from the Asaph collection of the Elohim Psalter. Were these three psalms already members of these minor psalters? It is impossible to say on the basis of the evidence before us. But if the three psalms were still circulating independently when I Macc. was written, then the present collections in which they stand would be subsequent to 100 B.C. If on the other hand they were already members of the present collections, sufficient time would have to be allowed after their composition for their insertion into

¹⁰ The active *ἐγγραφεν* is probably found but once as a formula of citation in these writings and then only in the sense of command (Mark 12:19). Subjectless verbs which imply God as subject are, with rare exceptions, in the present tense.

these collections¹¹ and for the later final redaction of the present great miscellany. Still, even for this complicated process an interval of sixty to seventy years might be sufficient.

From the examination of I Macc. we conclude that there is proof of the existence of two psalms now found in Books IV–V and of one psalm now found in the Asaph collection of Book III as early as 100 B.C. That these psalms were members at that time of the collections to which they now belong can neither be affirmed nor denied. That they were regarded as inspired cannot be proved. But even if both of these suppositions were adopted for the sake of argument, they would not require a composition of the psalms before the rise of the Maccabees (*ca.* 168 B.C.).

V. The next piece of evidence for the existence of the Psalter is of fundamental importance. The famous work *Ecclesiasticus* or *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* was originally written in Hebrew. It was translated into Greek by a grandson of the author. To his translation the grandson prefixed a Prologue in which he states that he went into Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of Ptolemy Euergetes, or 132 B.C., and during his residence there translated his grandfather's work. The translation will therefore have been made some time after 132. It is usually assigned to about 130. Yet it may have been later, and in fact the passage in which the date is given, though grammatically and exegetically very difficult, strongly suggests a date for the translation after the death of Ptolemy (*ca.* 117 B.C.).¹² Three times in the Prologue the grandson refers by means of a circumlocution to the Old Testament Scriptures:

a) Whereas many and great things have been given to us through the Law and the prophets and those who followed them.

b) My grandfather, Jesus (Ben Sira), having given himself more especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other patristic books,

¹¹ Some psalms may conceivably have been written with special reference to a collection, in which case the time of their composition and the time of their redaction would be the same. But this would not affect many psalms.

¹² Cf. Smend, *Die Weisheit des Jesus Sirach*, 3 ff. The recent attempt made by Hart (*Ecclesiasticus in Greek*, Cambridge, 1909) to push the date of the Prologue back to 247, I can hardly think will ultimately commend itself.

and having gained an adequate familiarity with them, was drawn on himself to compose something [one of the books ?] pertaining to instruction and wisdom.

Then after commenting on the difficulty of translating his grandfather's work from Hebrew into Greek, the translator finally says:

c) For not only this work, but also the Law itself and the prophecies and the rest of the books have no small difference when spoken in their original form.

At first sight these passages seem to have little bearing upon our subject. But their significance becomes apparent when the classification of the books in the Hebrew Canon is remembered. This has never been topical as in our English Bibles (i.e., Law, History, Poetry, Prophecy). A threefold ("tripartite") division was followed: Law, Prophets, Writings. To this division our Prologue contains the first specific reference in literature.

Now the Psalter is found in the third division of the Hebrew Canon among the "Writings."¹³ It has therefore been confidently argued that the recognition of the tripartite division of the Scriptures in the Prologue necessarily implies the completion of the Hebrew Canon, which in turn would carry with it not only the existence but also the canonicity of the Psalter as early as 117 B.C. Is not the whole equal to the sum of all its parts?

But this argument is fallacious. Granted that there were three divisions of the Scriptures thus early, the question is: Were they coextensive with the present three divisions? At this point the study of the origin of the Psalter merges into the history of the Canon. Without entering into a full discussion of the latter subject, it is sufficient to note that criticism recognizes three great stages in the formation of the Canon which correspond to its tripartite division. There was first the Canon of the Law, originating in the time of Nehemiah and Ezra (445-400 B.C.), then a Canon of the Prophets which was already known at least in its main outlines to Ben Sira the grandfather, *ca.* 190 B.C. (*vid. infra*).

¹³ The Prophets are subdivided into (a) Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and (b) Later Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minors. The Writings are: Psalms, Proverbs, Job; Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther; Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles, in this order.

There was finally the Canon of the Writings. This was formed out of a nucleus of books which for topical reasons or because of their recent origin were not included among the Prophets. This nucleus would seem to have occupied for some time a deuterocanonical position as compared with the first two groups, for it suffered various accretions from time to time as older books which had become increasingly venerated, or new books which strongly recommended themselves to the religious sense of the people, were added to it. The burning question in the history of the Canon is: When was the door to the third group finally shut so that other books could no longer find access to the sacred inclosure?

Since the first two groups were admittedly completed and incapable of receiving further additions when the grandson wrote his Prologue and since the grandson recognizes a third group as clearly as he does the first two groups, it has been inferred that the third group was also completed and closed by his day. But if what has been said of the origin of the last group in a nucleus capable of expansion is true, what seems to be a logical conclusion is found to be only an assumption. Granted a gradual expansion of the third group, the recognition of its *existence* does not necessarily involve a recognition of its *completion*. As a matter of fact the third division was almost certainly still in the process of forming. Daniel was not written until 168-165 B.C. and Esther possibly even later. Even if these very recent books were attached to the Writings as early as 117 B.C., this could only have been done on condition that the group was still in a fluid state and that such a theory as that of Josephus cited above, which would forever fix its limits, had not as yet been applied to it. All the evidence which we have favors such an undeveloped theory of canonicity, especially with reference to the Writings, in this early period. The grandson does not clearly distinguish his grandfather's work from the Scriptures in the above citations from the Prologue. The fact that the books of the third division were not admitted to either of the other groups, though at times topically belonging with them (e.g., Daniel the Prophet), shows that the Writings as a whole must have occupied a somewhat subordinate position in the Scriptures, which would be more likely to allow alteration. The varying

terminology applied in the Prologue to the third group as contrasted with the more exact nomenclature applied to the first two groups subtly suggests the more wavering outline of the last division. The confused state of the text illustrated by the wide divergences of the LXX from the Hebrew in such books as Daniel and Esther, to which large sections have been added, is incompatible with a strict theory of canonicity. Finally, the rabbinical discussions as to the exact limits of the Writings as late as the first century A.D., in the light of which the silence of the New Testament as to Songs, Esther, and Ecclesiastes gains a new significance, also suggest that a strict theory of canonicity was not applied to the third group in these earlier times. In view of all these facts, which can only be hinted at, we are safe in holding that while there was general agreement as to the nucleus of the Writings in the time of the grandson, there was no certainty as to its periphery, and that the doctrine of the Canon itself had not as yet been carefully defined.

What, now, is the bearing of all this upon the history of the Psalter? On the one hand there can be no question that the Psalter was one of those books which formed the nucleus of the group of Writings. Many of the psalms were used in the sacred services of the temple. As temple psalms they would naturally and speedily take on a sacred character. A large number of them were attributed to David, and this would increase their authority. The *a-priori* probability of such a development is supported by the evidence of Ecclesiasticus and Chronicles which show an extensive acquaintance with temple psalmody (*vid. infra*). Accordingly there can be no serious question that a collection of psalms was a constituent element and probably an originally constituent element of the group of "patristic writings" mentioned in the Prologue. On the other hand the collection of psalms as belonging to the third group would probably share in the vaguer ideas which attached to the canonicity of this group. Further, the same character of the Psalter as a temple hymnbook which would give it its speedy circulation among the people would also make in favor of continued accretions. Hymns do not naturally take on canonical character. They do not come with the "Thus

saith the Lord" of Prophecy. The idea of dogmatic authority and *exclusiveness*, inseparable from the idea of a canon, do not readily attach themselves to a *hymnbook*. Hence it is easy to see how many popular psalms which had been adopted into the temple ritual could gradually make their way into the older accredited collection. The limits of the collection would probably remain flexible for a considerable time. Thus the place of the Psalter in the third division of the Canon and also its nature as a hymn-book raise the question whether the collection of psalms which may safely be assumed as a part of the Writings by 117 B.C., was identical with the present Psalter. In view of what has already been said this is by no means obvious. But there is another element in the problem which has thus far been overlooked.

The grandson clearly implies in citation *c* given above that the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings had been *already translated* into Greek. Accordingly, the collection of psalms, which we have seen to be an integral part of the Writings, may safely be regarded as having been by this time also translated. The greater includes the less. But—and this is the really crucial point in the whole discussion—the earliest extant Greek translation of the Psalter, i.e., that of the LXX, is substantially identical with the Hebrew Psalter as we now have it. The same book-divisions, the same order of psalms (the variations in numbering are of little moment in this connection), the same accretions and redactions are found in the Greek translation as in the original. Of course, it is abstractly conceivable that there was an earlier form of the Greek Psalter which differed from its present form but kept gradually expanding as the Hebrew Psalter expanded, but there is absolutely no evidence of such a process. The Greek Psalter is in striking contrast in this respect, not only with the Greek Daniel and Esther, but also with the Greek Jeremiah, which undoubtedly *does* witness to a different stage in the history of the text of Jeremiah from that represented by the Hebrew form of the book. Under these circumstances the only correct standpoint to adopt for further investigation would seem to be to hold as a working hypothesis that the collection of psalms whose existence we may unhesitatingly infer from the Prologue of Ecclesiasticus, and whose translation we may

infer with equal assurance, was substantially identical with the Psalter which we now possess.

But if the Greek form of the Psalter already existed by 117 B.C., how much earlier than this is it necessary to go for the formation of the Hebrew Psalter in order to allow time for its acceptance even in a loose sense as Scripture and for its translation into Greek? On general principles a very considerable interval should be allowed for this double process. The question is again acute in view of the frequent assumption of Maccabean psalms. We have seen in connection with I Macc. that an interval of two generations might suffice for a psalm to acquire the dignity of Scripture, but would the shorter interval between the early Maccabean period and 117 suffice not only for this but for the translation of the Psalter into Greek? The same reasons which would favor a speedy circulation of the psalms after their composition and a speedy acquisition of scriptural dignity, would also favor a speedy translation. It is also fair to admit the greater possibility of so short an interval sufficing, if the Maccabean psalms were limited in number. But the presumption is becoming increasingly strong against a theory of the Psalter which allows so limited an interval for the working-out of so complicated a process.¹⁴ If the external evidence drawn from the Prologue does not positively veto Maccabean psalms, at least it should make us extremely careful in examining the internal evidence for their existence. It is at this point that our sense of direction must be scrupulously preserved.

In the foregoing it was assumed that a collection of psalms formed the nucleus of the third division of the Scriptures mentioned in the Prologue. In proof of this assumption, reference was made by way of anticipation to Ecclesiasticus itself as distinguished from the Prologue and also to Chronicles. In order to supplement the argument from the Prologue an examination of these earlier sources is next in order.

¹⁴ This is especially true, if, as is frequently done, many psalms are referred to the later Maccabean period.